

# The New German Far Right

*by Élisabeth Goudin*

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**The recent rise of the far right has disrupted the political balance in Germany. Its racism illustrates the failings of both denazification and historical introspection in the West. The next elections are in 2021... watch this space.**

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Despite the many links between France and Germany, ultimately the two countries know very little about each other and the French press commentary of the German elections on September 24, 2017 offers a prime example of this. Going only on French coverage of these elections, it would be difficult to fully understand what the new German far right represents, what views it propagates, and what relationship to history it conveys.

## **The Far Right in the German Parliament**

In a 7.9 point increase compared to the last elections in 2013, the AfD party (*Alternative für Deutschland*, Alternative for Germany) won 12.6% of the vote.<sup>1</sup> This score exceeded even the most pessimistic of polls and means that the new far-right political group will have no fewer than 94 members of Parliament representing them in the German Bundestag.

This is a first. Thanks to the 5% rule adopted in 1949 to learn from the failures of the Weimar Republic, a party can only have members of parliament if it obtains 5% of the vote or 3 'direct mandates' and, until September 24, 2017 no far right party had ever met these criteria. The AfD's admission to the Bundestag will have some very real consequences, particularly in financial terms. It will now receive 16 million euros of public funding per year, a figure based on its number of voters.

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<sup>1</sup> These figures, and those that follow, are the official results, which can be viewed here: <https://bundestagswahl-2017.com/ergebnis/>

Taking a closer look at the AfD's score, the difference between the new *Länder* (former East Germany) and the rest of Germany immediately stands out: in the East, 21.5% of citizens (26% of men and 17% of women) voted for the party, whereas in the West this was 'only' true of 14% of men and 8% of women.<sup>2</sup> In Saxony, the AfD even came in first, winning 27% of the vote and beating Angela Merkel's CDU (the Christian-Democrat party) by a few votes.<sup>3</sup>

Polls show that the AfD won votes from all the other parties without exception<sup>4</sup> and particularly from the CSU, the very conservative Christian Social Union in Bavaria, and Die Linke, the party to the left of the SPD merging the PDS – successor of the Communist Party in power in East Germany – and the social democrats disappointed by Schröder's liberal economic policy.

Most of their votes, though, came from abstainers: the AfD convinced 1.2 million citizens who did not usually vote to go to the polls for the first time, particularly among the 35-44 age group and among unemployed people, manual workers, and white collar workers. This dynamic enabled the AfD to claim on television channel *MittelDeutscher Rundfunk* (MDR)<sup>5</sup> that these elections were just their first step on the path to government in the next elections in 2021.

## **An Unapologetic Relationship to Nazism**

And yet the AfD's electoral campaign was consistently provocative, which one might have imagined would have made German voters eschew such a party.

Alexander Gauland, who led the campaign alongside Alice Weidel, stated, for example, that Germany could 'be proud of what German soldiers did during the two world wars'.<sup>6</sup> Talking about Jérôme Boateng, a black footballer on the German team, he declared to a journalist that 'people like him as a footballer, but don't want to have a Boateng as a

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<sup>2</sup> For more details, see the online statistics portal Statista:

<https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/753306/umfrage/ergebnis-der-bundestagswahl/>

<sup>3</sup> Local newspaper *Sächsische Zeitung* provides a summary of the results of this election for each constituency in the federal state of Saxony: <http://www.sz-online.de/sachsen/wahl2017/bundestagswahl-ergebnisse>

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed and comparative analysis of the number of voters from each different party who decided to vote for the AfD, see the overview provided by newspaper *Die Welt* on September 25, 2017:

<https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article168989573/Welche-Parteien-die-meisten-Stimmen-an-die-AfD-verloren.html>

<sup>5</sup> The video of the interview is available here: <http://www.ardmediathek.de/tv/MDR-extra/Petry-AfD-will-nach-der-n%C3%A4chsten-Wahl-r/MDR-Fernsehen/Video?bcastId=7545436&documentId=46217888>

<sup>6</sup> The newspaper *Die Zeit* reported this assertion, placing them in the context of the AfD's specific ideology claiming it is time to 'do away with National-Socialism'. See <http://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2017-09/afd-alexander-gauland-nazi-zeit-neubewertung>

neighbour'.<sup>7</sup> And he also suggested 'sending back to Anatolia' Aydab Özoguz, the Social Democrat Minister of State and Commissioner for Migration, Refugees and Integration, using the word '*entsorgen*'<sup>8</sup> which is actually closer in meaning to 'deport' than to 'send back' and literally means 'to get rid of'.

As for Beatrix von Storch, vice-president of the AfD, she even declared, in an official statement in 2016, that German police officers working on the borders should be allowed to shoot illegal migrants, including children.<sup>9</sup> The list of examples goes on. What all these disturbing stances have in common is an entirely unapologetic relationship to Germany's Nazi past.

It is no coincidence that the AfD's best scores were in former East Germany. Of course, there is the fact that unemployment and job insecurity are much more common there than in the West. But there are also historical reasons. On February 26, 1948, the Soviet military administration officially put an end to the denazification of its occupied zones. With Moscow's assent, a National Democratic Party of Germany was created in what would become East Germany. This party continued to exist until 1990 and was one of the so-called *Blockparteien*, as part of the fake competition organised by the SED to justify holding elections.

This *National-demokratische Partei Deutschlands* (NDPD) was founded with a view to taking in the former Nazi party (NSDAP) officials, the former *Wehrmacht* officers, and certain prisoners of war who had returned to East Germany. It had 52 members of parliament, its own publishing house – *Die Nation* – and even an eponymous newspaper, which was continuously published every two months. The SED in power in East Germany also included former NSDAP officials, such that the far right never ceased to exist there.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, insofar as this State was founded on the myth of anti-fascism and the celebration of the communist heroes of anti-Hitler resistance, there was never any serious reflection on national socialism, no critical introspection of the sort that took place in West Germany.

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<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2016-05/alexander-gauland-afd-vorabmeldung>

<sup>8</sup> The video of this declaration can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iV7YgdSRCLI>

<sup>9</sup> The video of this declaration can be viewed here:

<https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article151685758/Von-Storch-bejaht-Waffengebrauch-auch-gegenueber-Kindern.html>

<sup>10</sup> For an overview of the archives available on this issue, see this publication by the organisation responsible for studying the Stasi archives: Walter Süß, *Zu Wahrnehmung und Interpretation des Rechtsextremismus in der DDR durch das MfS, Analysen und Berichte* (Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes: 1993).

## **A Lack of Critical Introspection**

There have been some noteworthy exceptions to this refusal to look at the past, but the founding myth of antifascism has nonetheless prevailed. This suffices in and of itself to explain why certain artists and intellectuals chose to live in East Germany after the Second World War, with a view to showing the world, after the Nazi crimes, that a socialist society was possible without people exploiting one another. Someone like Christa Wolf, for example, took this stance toward the East-German societal project from the outset.

There have been very real consequences to the Soviets abandoning denazification too hastily in their occupation zone and to East Germany's specific stance towards the national-socialist past ('we have nothing to do with this, as communists we were at the avant-garde of anti-Hitler resistance'). For example, Jana Hensel, born in 1976, recounts in her book *Zonenkinder*<sup>11</sup> that, a few years after the fall of the Berlin wall, she found herself at a dinner with some West German students who explained that they all had a grandparent, or a great uncle, or a neighbour who had belonged to the NSDAP. And she realised that, to her knowledge, no one in her family or around her, no one in her school friends' families, had ever had the slightest link to Hitler's party.

However, the problem is that this lack of critical introspection now also concerns West Germany. The heyday of attempts to look back at the past and work through it took place just after unification and throughout the 1990s: a 1995 exhibition on the Wehrmacht showed for the first time that, contrary to popular belief, the German army's hands were not clean – far from it – and that they had committed acts of violence that were perfectly comparable to those of the SS, particularly on the Eastern front.

The publication in 1996 of *Hitler's Willing Executioners. Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*<sup>12</sup> by Daniel Goldhagen, a professor at Harvard, also sparked much debate in the German public space. And, among other things, when the Stasi archives were opened in 1990 this fuelled reflection about the Germans' collective responsibility in the two successive dictatorships.

## **Political Stability or Lack of Imagination?**

However, since the 2000s, such introspection has increasingly waned and an additional factor came into play when Angela Merkel took office in 2005: the Chancellor decided to govern with the social democrats in the context of what in Germany is known as a 'grand

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<sup>11</sup> Jana Hensel, *Zonenkinder* (Rowohlt: 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (Vintage Books: 1996).

coalition', such that the left-right debate, which tends to be structural in democracy, could no longer be freely expressed.

This grand coalition has remained in place since 2005, with the exception of 2009-2013. This has opened up a space for the sort of radical discourse spearheaded by the AfD, which bases much of its rhetoric on the need for renewal and the idea that all the traditional political parties have the same programme.

Political life in the Federal Republic of Germany has been incontestably stable. The Christian Democrats remained in power from 1949 to 1966, then the Social Democrats held the reins from 1969 until Kohl's arrival. Kohl was Chancellor for 14 years and Merkel has now been in post for 12 years. No other European country has seen the same stability.

Emmanuel Droit published an opinion piece in *Le Monde* entitled 'The Germans are bored and they like it'.<sup>13</sup> He emphasised the lifelessness of the electoral campaign and the fact that the Germans, who suffered a lot, and above all caused a lot of suffering, in the twentieth century now want to 'stand back from History'. However, according to him, the problem is that they are doing this at the worst possible moment, just as the far right is on the rise across the Western world and where imagination is needed to renew both democracy and the process of European construction.

This has left the field wide open for the AfD, who have used the traditional rhetoric of the far right: opposition to the 'system', without it being clear exactly what that referred to; distrust of the 'elites' and intellectuals; critical discourse about the media, while nevertheless putting it to good use (the *Bild* has published an incredible number of 'fake news' stories concerning the alleged sexual assault of young blonde women by asylum seekers, with retractions published in very small print in the following issue or not published at all).

## **Migrants and Muslims**

The AfD's aggressive discourse has principally focused on Islam since the migrant crisis in 2015, which marked a turning point in this regard. Founded in 2013 as a liberal and Eurosceptic party, after 2015 the AfD became a far-right party along the same model as the FPÖ in Austria.

At the time of the debate on same-sex marriage prior to its adoption by the Bundestag in June 2017, a journalist asked the leader of the AfD campaign, Alice Weidel, her opinion on the issue. Despite herself living with a Swiss woman of Sri-Lankan origin, with whom she was bringing up two adopted children, she declared she was against it. She justified this

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<sup>13</sup> Emmanuel Droit, 'Les Allemands s'ennuient et ils aiment ça', *Le Monde*, September 21, 2017.

contradiction by stating that debating ‘same-sex marriage’ made no sense when ‘millions of Muslims for whom homosexuality is a crime are arriving and threatening our freedom’. This illustrates a recurring feature of the AfD’s rhetoric, which consists in deliberately presenting Islam as a backward and homophobic religion.

The AfD’s argument posits that ‘preserving German national identity’ is incompatible with the arrival of migrants. The party’s electoral posters on this topic were particularly telling in this regard, featuring a white woman’s pregnant belly with the slogan ‘New Germans? We make them ourselves’. The saddest and more disturbing poster of all was undoubtedly the photograph of three Bavarian women in traditional dress subtitled: ‘Diversity of Colour? We already have it’. One would be hard pressed to show less empathy towards migrants than by equating coloured dresses and skin colour in this way.

Despite this very sombre state of affairs, we should nevertheless not forget that 87% of the German electorate voted against the AfD. Between the two rounds of the French presidential election, the fear that Marine Le Pen might be elected was very strong in Germany and perhaps even more so than in France.

There is therefore reason to hope that this breach in the consensus on the German constitution’s fundamental values, on the fight against racism, and on the right to asylum will remain a marginal phenomenon and that, unlike the FPÖ in Austria, the AfD will not become a permanent fixture in the political landscape.

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